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Representing Irishness in Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter

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**The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.**

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Difference and Division: representing Irishness in Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a place-making project in post-conflict Belfast, analyzing efforts to transform an area which has often been used as a byword for militant Irish nationalism and social deprivation into an inclusive, vibrant tourist destination and cultural hub themed around the Irish language (called the 'Gaeltacht Quarter'). The antagonistic and territorial assumptions about place that characterize divided cities now co-exist with global trends towards the commodification of difference as recreation or spectacle, and longstanding struggles over the representation of contested identities are intertwined with the struggle to compete for international tourism and investment. The proliferation of officially themed quarters in many cities across the world reflects the enthusiasm with which planning authorities have embraced the vision of difference as a benign resource for the creation of tourist revenue. Yet, analysis of 'quartering' processes reveals that such commodification does not neutralise or evade the political potency of naming, representing and spatially delimiting cultural difference. Indeed, this paper argues that such projects offer a valuable insight into the inseparable roles of physical and representational space as both loci and catalysts of contestation in urban conflicts. Bringing together a wide range of public and private interest groups, projects redefining parts of Belfast as distinctive quarters have been explicitly linked with efforts to deterritorialize the city. The creation of bounded, themed spaces as an attempt to leave behind the ethno-sectarian geographical segregation that parts of Belfast still experience has its particular ironies, but is in many ways typical of contemporary trends in urban planning. The Gaeltacht Quarter exemplifies both the importance and the challenge of representation within cities where culturally distinguishing features have acted as

markers of violent division, and where negotiations about how to successfully encompass difference necessarily address multiple local and international audiences simultaneously.

Introduction

This paper considers a place-making project in Belfast, Northern Ireland, asking how the contestation over physical and representational space (Neill 1999) that is so often a feature of life in cities, and which becomes so urgent in situations of violent conflict and its aftermath, relates to the simultaneous trend towards the celebration and commoditization of locally rooted and spatially bounded cultural identities. Over the last decade or so, twenty-first century Belfast has experienced a transition away from decades of sustained political violence, and this slow and patchy process of attempted deterritorialization has coincided with an international fashion for the deliberate ‘theming’ of city space. A reassessment of political and cultural representation for competing ethno-national aspirations has inevitably been part of the shift away from violence in this polarized city (Boal 1994).

The continuing struggle for symbolic territory, which can be seen as a competitive quest for both the moral high ground and an audience to address from it, is indivisible from the emergence of the city into a regional and global economic landscape from which it was isolated, in some significant senses, throughout the forty-odd years of the Troubles. There has been a rapid spate of planning and tourism development that address the need for post-industrial cities to market ‘cultural identities’ in lieu of other products. These are taking place in a context where even banal, bureaucratic decision-making about urban space is haunted by the ‘desperate spatial sorting process’ (Murtagh 2000: 190; see also Boal and Livingstone 1984:

172; O'Dowd and Kamarovna 2009: 9) with which the Troubles began, and which solidified over the following decades into a stubborn, if unstable, 'patchwork' city (Hepburn 1994). This paper does not argue that all of this makes Belfast a special case; on the contrary, rather, the particular research value of Belfast is as a place in which many of the recurring issues of urban theory and place research can be studied, in historically condensed and physically concrete forms. In this paper, I will concentrate on one of those issues: how the contemporary race to identify cultural 'USPs' with which to 'sell' cities (Kearns and Philo, 1993) relates to older, less comfortable forms of urban boundary-making.

Background to Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter

Bell and Jayne (2004) have identified the 'quartering' of cities as a pervasive urban regeneration strategy across the UK, and it is one that Belfast was quick to adopt in the rush to regenerate the city which took place in the wake of the peace process (Neill 1999). A mixture of business people, local politicians, regeneration and tourism professionals took to the idea of 'quartering' so eagerly that we now have 'seven...and counting!' (www.barnabasventures.com, 10/07/2009). I will focus on one Quarter in particular, the Gaeltacht Quarter, because it highlights how the fashion for cherishing localized difference in a way which combines elements of nostalgia, aspiration, consumerism and idealism does not erase the antagonistic, territorial and exclusionary aspects of urban place identifications with which we are also familiar, but intertwines with them in interesting ways. This project is unique among Belfast's seven Quarters in that its physical location already has a powerful place identity which is intertwined with the city's history of conflict, and in that its designated theme relates to the very question of national identity on which conflict in and over

Belfast rests. The word ‘Gaeltacht’ is the Irish language word for an Irish-speaking area or community, and the Gaeltacht Quarter is based on the Falls Road in West Belfast, an area that played a particular part in the conflict (if West Belfast was ‘the “cockpit of the North”...then the Falls was the pilot’s seat’, Livingstone 1998:24). The name of this road has been incessantly, and often lazily, used as a shorthand for militant Irish republicanism in journalism and local political discourse.

The idea of a ‘Gaeltacht Quarter’ was first proposed in 2002, in a report by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force. (This group was set up in 2001 by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Industry and the Department of Social Development to look at ways to reduce deprivation in West Belfast as a whole.) Clive Dutton, an English urban regeneration expert, was commissioned to produce a report, published in 2004, on how a Gaeltacht Quarter on the Falls Road might work. When my preliminary research began in 2006, a limited company called An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta Teo (‘The Gaeltacht Quarter Ltd’) had been set up to manage the development. This was loosely based on the recommendations of the Dutton Report (2004), but represented a scaling back of that report’s ambitions in terms of the number of government departments and local interest groups directly involved.

Seo Chugainn An mBéal Feirste Nua

One of the unusual features of the Gaeltacht Quarter is that it has relied on co-operation between government agencies and Falls Road- or Irish language-based ‘community’ organisations from the very beginning. It is now lead principally by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Forbairt Feirste, a West Belfast Irish language development organisation, which aims ‘to unleash the socio-economic power of Belfast’s Irish speaking community to the benefit of the entire city’ and uses

the slogan ‘Seo chugainn an Béal Feirste Nua’, (‘Here comes the new Belfast’) (www.forbairstfeirste.com/about). This declaration of a ‘new Belfast’ in the Irish language, through which Irish is linked with ‘socio-economic power’ and proclaimed as a resource for ‘the entire city’, marks both a transformation in the role of Irishness in this cityscape, and the latest phase in a very old story of jostling for nationally identified space in the city.

As a symbol of Irish nationhood, the place of the Irish language in Belfast has always been a politically and emotionally sensitive subject for many of the city’s inhabitants. McCoy (1997:120) points out that for fifty years of Unionist ‘hegemony’, Irish was actively denied a place in ‘public life’, to the extent that in 1948 street signs in ‘languages other than English’ were specifically banned. During the decades of political violence, the enthusiastic adoption of Irish by some republican prisoners contributed to both a resurgence of interest in the language among nationalists, and an increased fear of the language among unionists. Objections to the Gaeltacht Quarter project have included Unionist fears of Irish incursions into the UK state. DUP councillor Nelson McCausland commented on early proposals in 2002: ‘I am trying to find out...if this is the first step towards getting the Dublin Government to recognise a Gaeltacht Quarter here’ (*Andersonstown News* 26/08/02: 3).

The process through which pre-existing Irish language spaces, organizations and activities around the Falls Road are reframed and transformed through the naming and delineation of the Gaeltacht Quarter is a continuing one, but strong themes have been visible for several years. One is a self-conscious projection of contemporaneity; this works against pervasive visions of Irish as either negatively primitive and backwards, or positively ancient and unchanging, as well as against images of the Falls as a place hopelessly mired in its own traumatic history. A guide to Ireland for

French tourists called ‘A chacun son Ireland’, ‘To each his Ireland’, lists under ‘Activités Indispensables’, ‘Unmissable Activities’, ‘le Gaeltacht Quarter regorge d’expériences culturelles du 21^e siècle autour de la langue irlandaise’, ‘the Gaeltacht Quarter abounds with twenty-first century cultural experiences of the Irish language’ (Tourism Ireland 2008: 12). Another strand is what Sean Misteil, a champion of the project since its inception, has written about as ‘cultural promiscuity’ (2006: 191). This vision of an Irishness which is anything but insular is perfectly represented in Belfast City Council’s Gaeltacht Guide, which invites the visitor to ‘Listen as the consonants of England jostle and jest with the vowels of Scotland and Ireland, where the mountains converse with the architecture and where the ancient past has emerged as a dynamic present’. A third important element of the Gaeltacht Quarter ‘frame’ is that of economic potential. The Gaeltacht Quarter is not only presented as a cultural ‘resource’ for the city as a whole, but as a financial one. This reacts against longstanding perceptions of Irish as inevitably overwhelmed by global economic forces, or as a financial drain on the state. Perhaps more importantly, this discourse works on an implicit view of economic growth as an unarguable, quantifiable public good; while markers of national culture may be rejected or experienced as exclusionary by some of Belfast’s citizens, money is money.

Taming the city?

The way in which An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta Teo has approached the theming of this area is informed by a way of thinking about the links between place and culture in which the fractured territoriality of urban division is reimagined as exotic, recreational spectacle from the assumed perspective of international tourists, and as an outward-looking yet geographically rooted self-confidence from the perspective of

an endlessly invoked 'local community'. Board members' use of terms like 'glocalisation', references to famously regenerated cities like Barcelona, and even the claim to a 'cosmopolitan ambience' in Gaeltacht Quarter publicity material, display an awareness of how contemporary theorizing about place has fed in to international place marketing strategies (Gaeltacht Quarter Guide, Belfast City Council). The increasing role of 'culture' as 'the business of cities', as Zukin (2001: 325) puts it, has made the markers of difference through which people in Belfast have become accustomed to negotiating socially and sometimes physically risky paths into a potentially marketable resource.

The coexistence of competing nationalist aspirations within Belfast's population, violently expressed through Irish republican and British loyalist paramilitary activity over generations, means that geographically marked cultural difference has been most saliently registered not in touristic 'Quarters', but in areas of the city that news reports refer to as 'ghettoes' or 'enclaves'. The area the Gaeltacht Quarter covers is itself one of these working class, largely residentially segregated neighbourhoods. To local audiences; the Falls Road registers as 'different' not so much from the homogenized blandness that tourism agencies imagine 'cultural tourists' escaping, as from those parts of Belfast that assert a British identity. The 'rebranding' of this place as the Gaeltacht Quarter therefore raises questions about how much difference, or what type of difference, can be accommodated within a model of the city that sees diversity as a marketable commodity.

Chang (2000) has written about the theming of space as a process of 'taming'. The Gaeltacht Quarter, which I have heard accused of both gentrification and ghettoisation, demonstrates that places are not so easily tamed; 'theming' offers a ready-made way of reading parts of the city, but does not erase more complicated

place identifications. Bell and Jayne (2004: 254) conclude that ‘quartering’ projects ‘run the risk of replaying defensive or regressive territorial impulses, too – in trying to foster local pride and ownership, there is the ever-present risk of old territorialisms being reheated, and new exclusions being produced...And what about the abject, the scapegoat, the unquarterable other?’ (2004: 254). The rush to ‘theme’ urban space which Archer (1997) and Hannigan (2001) wrote about around the beginning of the twentieth century is one of the few models of regeneration which Belfast can be said to have a head start in, as the boundaries which mark the city as ‘divided’ now also mark sites of interest to tourists, or places where ‘culture’ has become a cottage industry (see Zukin 2001: 235; Fincher and Jacobs 1998: 13). This does not mean that physical and cultural boundaries are no longer site of struggle; Zukin (2001: 325) reminds us that ‘culture is also a powerful means of controlling cities’. Bell and Jayne (2004: 1) have analysed the delineation of particular spaces as ‘quarters’ as a process that necessarily defines more than physical space: ‘the symbolic framing of culture becomes a powerful tool as capital and cultural symbolism intertwine’. Given this, it is not surprising that the ‘framing’ of the Gaeltacht Quarter is a delicate process.

Conclusion

Defining a physical boundary around the Gaeltacht Quarter, as you may imagine, has been a sensitive issue. Words like ‘hub’ and ‘cluster’ are used in preference to drawing a line on a map, while the project’s leaders insist that the border is ‘a dotted line’ or ‘a blurred boundary’, rather than an impermeable one. That one section of this dotted line follows the ‘peace line’, the series of walls and fences that separate the Falls from the neighbouring Protestant Shankill Road, brings the inherent ironies of

‘quartering’ an already ‘patchwork’ city into focus. As I suggested earlier, this is not an issue specific to Belfast, but raises questions that many cities face, about how representational space can reflect the fluid possibilities of urban life when its spatial representations take such inflexible forms. This is not merely an abstract problem; just after the Good Friday Agreement, Neill (1999: 273) wrote that ‘At the heart of the political peace process in Northern Ireland is the issue of how the identity of the nationalist Catholic population can be given agreed and officially legitimized forms of expression’, and that given the profound link between identity and place, this is ‘a spatial planning issue’. Quartering is one response to this conundrum, and its determined focus on celebration and recreation only underlines the politically fraught definition of difference which attends all place-making processes.

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